

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 12, 2018

The Honorable Robert L. Wilkie Jr.
Secretary
United States Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

During your confirmation hearing in the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, as well as during our meeting prior to that hearing, I made clear to you my strong support for the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act and urged your support for this legislation that would finally extend disability benefits to our Blue Water veterans for medical conditions associated with Agent Orange exposure. As a senior member of this Committee and the senior Senator from Nevada representing 80,000 Vietnam Veterans in Nevada, I am disappointed that, under your leadership, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) opposes this legislation. That is why I respectfully request your reconsideration of this bill and ask your support for ensuring these heroes receive the disability benefits they have earned after exposure to this toxin.

As you well know, exposure to Agent Orange is associated with terrible diseases and cancers – Chronic B-cell Leukemia, Hodgkin's Disease, Lymphoma, Ischemic Heart Disease, prostate and respiratory cancers, and more. Agent Orange exposure also impacts the children of veterans through birth defects like spina bifida. Yet, despite what these veterans and their families have suffered, you urged the Senate to reject this legislation. One of the reasons you cited for opposition was related to cost. The cost to provide the care and benefits we owe to our veterans for serving and sacrificing should not be part of your reasoning to reject this legislation. Furthermore, you have requested that Senators wait until late 2019 for a study to be published regarding the health of Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans compared to those of similar age who were not deployed. Our veterans do not have the time to wait for such a study to be completed when they are suffering from diseases that are life threatening.

Again, I urge your reconsideration of this issue. The previous VA Secretary agreed that providing these benefits was the right thing to do for Blue Water veterans, and members who voted in support of the legislation in the House of Representatives also understood that it was the right thing to do. Your opposition creates an unnecessary obstacle to Congress finally completing its duty to provide benefits to our Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans. I remain disappointed with your opposition, and using my role on the Committee, I will continue to strongly support and push for passage of this legislation.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and it is my hope we can reach an agreement on providing these benefits to Blue Water veterans and fulfilling America's commitment to care for those who sacrificed for our freedoms.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dean Heller". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Dean" and the last name "Heller" clearly distinguishable.

DEAN HELLER
U.S. Senator